

JOHN TOE

“What?” said Alyssa, sitting up so fast her sunglasses fell off the top of her head and onto the floor.

“It’s true,” I said as she bent down and put her head under the table.

“No way,” she said in a muffled voice.

She grabbed my shoe.

“That’s my foot,” I said.

“I knew that,” Alyssa replied, coming up again. “I was triangulating.”

She put the sunglasses on the table and said, “I don’t believe you.”

I shrugged.

“Don’t shrug,” Alyssa said.

“Why not? It’s an occasion for shrugging,” I replied. “You not believing me is something I have no response to. Hence the shrug.”

“Then don’t respond,” she said. “Shrugging is like – ”

She waved her hands around, as though the end of her sentence might be floating in the air, waiting for her to pluck it out.

“It’s like reverse mansplaining,” she finished.

I was about to reply when Alyssa’s phone rang. I say rang, it didn’t actually ring, it just played the theme music to Queer Eye. Alyssa hates Queer Eye because she wants to be on it, but she still has the theme music as her ringtone.

“Tony!” she shouted into the phone. “Yeah, I can’t talk. I’m with Davey and he’s being a prick.”

None of that sentence was true. I wasn’t being a prick, I hate being called Davey, and she certainly can talk.

“Well, fuck you,” she told Tony and rang off. “That was Tony,” she explained.

“You still haven’t apologised,” I said.

“For what now?” Alyssa asked. She had a point. Our entire relationship was centred around Alyssa doing things that I thought she should apologise for and she didn’t.

I should have let it go, I really should. But I had a hangover from last night’s martini marathon, and the Bloody Marys weren’t cutting through it. So I said:

“For the John Doe thing.”

Alyssa lit a cigarette and did her amazing inhale, where she just puffed at the filter for one second but then absolute clouds of smoke come out of her mouth.

“There you go again,” she said. “It’s not called a John Doe.”

“Remind me then,” I said. “Remind me what it’s really called.”

She gave me a crooked smile. Alyssa’s crooked smiles were great. Like you were funny, but also she really loved you.

“I told you,” she said, “It’s called a John Toe.”

“John Toe,” I repeated. “And a girl corpse is called a Jane Toe?”

“That’s right,” she said.

“You do know how dumb you sound right now?” I said.

“I know you are,” said Alyssa, “But what am I?”

I ignored her.

“Why,” I asked, “Why would anyone call a corpse a John Toe?”

“Why would anyone call it John Doe?” she replied.

“I forget, but there’s a reason,” I replied. “Whereas there’s no reason on earth to call a dead body a John Toe.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she said, exhaling a cloud bank. “They’re called a John Toe for a very simple reason.”

“Which is?”

“Which is because when they’re in the mortuary they have a little tag tied to them,” said Alyssa. “And what is that tag tied to? Their toe.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

Alyssa shook her head.

“It’s not called a John Finger, is it?” she said.

I gave up at that point and ordered two more Bloody Marys.

I was woken by the phone ringing.

“Are you awake?” said Alyssa’s voice.

“No,” I replied. “Wait, yes. Because you called me. It’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“Oh hi, speaking clock,” she said sweetly. “I didn’t ring to get the time.”

“OK,” I said, reaching for the glass beside my bed, which still contained a thin film of whisky. “Why did you ring?”

“I can’t stop thinking about the toe.”

“What?”

“The toe. The John Toe.”

“You’re calling me at this hour to tell me that?”

“Who else would I call?”

I gave up.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“Come over,” she said.

“That’s a bad idea.”

“Because of Marcus?”

“Yes because of Marcus.” I had no intention of running into Alyssa’s occasional boyfriend who was a moron, and nasty with it too.

“He’s away on business.”

“Selling drugs.”

“Which is a business. Come now, I’m going out of my mind.”

She opened the door to me wearing a long plaid dressing-gown.

“That’s my robe,” I said.

Alyssa shrugged. “Did you bring whisky?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Can we get on with it? I mean,” I added, “whatever ‘it’ is.”

I sat on the couch in the living room while Alyssa made tea. She made terrible tea, but her coffee was worse.

“I don’t know why I’m here,” I said. “Can’t you just go online and look it up?”

“I did,” she said. “Nothing about John Toe anywhere.

“Did you look up John - ”

“Or Jane Toe.”

I drank some tea. It was appalling.

“Listen, Alyssa,” I said. “I’m going home now. Can we talk about this in the morning?”

“I had a dream,” she said. “A bad one.”

“I’ll stay,” I said.

We all have dreams, obviously, and Alyssa’s no exception. The only difference is that for a few days after Alyssa has a dream, she has trouble telling the dream from reality. Generally this isn’t a big problem: if Alyssa has a dream where she’s a world-famous opera singer, she just puts on La Traviata and goes around singing in her kitchen and being more of a diva than usual. And one time she dreamt that Brooklyn had somehow become a tropical island, so we went there for the day in shorts and Hawaiian shirts and had a tropical holiday. That sort of thing. And after a while, the dream reality fades and she can step down from cloud nine.

But when Alyssa has bad dreams, nothing can convince her that they’re not real. There was a time when she dreamed the subway was full of giant killer bats and for two months she had to get cabs everywhere. Once she dreamed that cigarettes had souls: she nearly gave up smoking. Oh, and there was her recurring nightmare where the dogs of New York were out to get her:

this wouldn't have been a problem, but Alyssa was earning a few dollars extra as a dog-walker in Central Park, so goodbye that job.

Suffice to say, when Alyssa has a bad dream, I'm there.

I made myself a bed on her couch with some old blankets and a fake fur coat for a pillow. I got up and opened a window to let some of the stale cigarette smoke out. Then I tried to get some sleep.

I had barely closed my eyes when I heard a shriek from the bedroom. I rushed in and turned on the light. Alyssa was sitting bolt upright in bed. She was shaking like a frightened puppy and her eyes were as wide as plates.

"What is it?" I said.

"He was here," Alyssa said, her voice trembling.

"Who was?" I asked.

Alyssa looked at me. I had never seen her so terrified.

"John Toe."

It took me a moment to realise what she'd just said.

"What?"

"Don't what me," she said. "You heard."

"Is this one of your dreams?"

"No," Alyssa said. "If it was one of my dreams, I would have, you know. Woken up. And screamed."

"Which you did."

"Did what?"

"Scream, dummy."

"I screamed because it was real. And it was fucking scary."

I went into the kitchen, Alyssa following.

"Where are you going?"

"To get a drink."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

I looked at her. She was wearing pyjamas and an annoyed expression.

"Those are my pyjamas," I said.

"And that's my whisky."

I poured a second glass.

"Tell me."

"I already told you."

"OK. You saw something."

"I saw *him*."

"John Toe."

"Stop saying everything in that fucking...*English* voice."

She started crying. I hate it when Alyssa cries, because she's really good at it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Just – describe what happened."

She drank her whisky, then she drank mine.

"I was asleep," she said. "I was having this weird dream - "

"Aha."

"Aha fuck you. It was a dream about a lobster. I was the singer in a rock band and the lobster was the guitarist, and it was playing really long solos - "

"Anyway."

She gave me a look. "I remember shouting at the lobster, except I was shouting in real life too, and I woke up. And that's when I saw him. After I woke up."

Her voice started to tremble. Whatever she had seen, it was real to her.

"He was about six feet tall, he had on a suit and tie, and he was just standing there. Right next to the bed."

"What did he look like?"

"I just told you."

"No, what was his face like?"

"He didn't have one. He just had - "

"What?"

She gestured at her own face.

"Where his head should be, it was just a toe. A big toe."

I was on the verge of laughing when I saw Alyssa's expression. She was terrified.

"He didn't say a word," Alyssa said. We were sitting on the unmade sofa bed in her front room now, and the whisky had been replaced with coffee. "He didn't move, didn't even look at me. I mean, he couldn't look at me, he had no eyes. Just a big - toenail – where his face should be."

"Then what happened?" I asked.

"Nothing," said Alyssa, as if it was obvious. "I got out of bed, sort of tiptoed around him and came in here."

"You mean he's still in there?"

I picked up a golf club – Alyssa kept it in case of intruders, and in case she was capable of hitting someone – and crept towards the bedroom. Alyssa followed at a safer distance.

I pushed the bedroom door and it creaked open with a high whine.

I saw him. He was standing where Alyssa said he was, not moving, just standing. In the dim light from the next room, I could see his black jacket and white shirt collar, and his head. His face was turned away, but the back of his head was – it was skin. No hair, just skin.

I don't know how, but I knew it was him. John Toe. Without thinking, I swung the club. It hit him right in the back of the head and he pitched forward onto the bed.

"What the fuck?" yelled Alyssa. She ran past me and bent over the body. The club had crushed his skull where it had connected – it was a nine iron – and already blood was pooling in the wound.

"It was him," I said, "John Toe."

"You didn't have to kill him!" she shouted.

"What are you talking about?" I shouted back. "He was – you were – " I gave it up.

"Turn him over," Alyssa said.

I grabbed his arm.

"Not like that, dummy," she said, and thrust her hands under his chest. I followed suit and together we flipped the body over.

"Shit," she said.

The body had a face, and the face was a familiar one. Marcus.

"When did he start shaving his head?" I asked.

"Does that matter right now?" Alyssa replied. "You just killed my boyfriend."

"You said it was – "

"This is on you," she said. "Don't try and shift the blame."

She stood up.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just stressed."

"I get it," I said. "It's fine."

Alyssa looked down at the body.

"Now what?" she said.

I thought for a moment.

"I know a guy," I said.

"You always know a guy," she said.

"No, but this time I really do. I dated him for a while."

"In which case you don't know a guy. You knew a guy."

"We're still talking," I said, defensively and, quite possibly, untruthfully. In fact, I had no idea if Richard would even remember me.

"Call him then," said Alyssa, still clearly in this-is-all-your-fault mode.

Richard remembered me. What's more, he was actually pleased to get my call.

"You want to go for a drink?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "Listen, Richard, before we do that, I need a favour."

There was a pause at the other end of the line.

"Is it a weird favour?"

I drew in a breath.

"It's pretty weird," I said.

"Great! I love weird," Richard said. "I mean, I work in a morgue, right?"

"What did you tell him?" Alyssa asked.

"Just that a guy broke into your apartment and I hit him with a golf club and he died."

"Wow," said Alyssa. "You really sugared that pill."

"What else could I do? Say he got the flu and the back of his head fell out? Anyway, he doesn't care."

"He doesn't?"

"Guy works in a morgue. He has a weird laugh. Like a dog giggling."

"Dogs don't giggle."

"Yeah, that's why it's weird."

The bell rang. I opened the door to see Richard in full crime scene overalls, with a gurney.

"You brought a gurney?"

"I had to," he said. "I'm not putting him over my shoulder."

There was a van outside. I helped Richard get the gurney inside.

"You can sit up front with me," he said.

"What about me?" said Alyssa. She hadn't lifted a finger to help, just made comments all the way down in the elevator.

"You can ride in back," Richard said. "There's a little chair."

Nobody stopped us when we arrived at the morgue. Richard led the way into a cold room full of metal surfaces. We lifted Marcus onto a table.

"What are you going to do with him?" I asked.

Richard shrugged.

"We get a lot of bodies in here with no ID," he said. "I'll just leave him here a couple of weeks and then send him off to the incinerator. Until then, he's just another John Doe."

I looked at Alyssa.

“Told you,” I said.
She didn’t reply.
“You owe me a drink,” said Richard.
“Sure thing,” I said.

Everything went back to normal for a while after that. Alyssa ran into a couple of Marcus’ clients, some of them trying to be casual asking if she’d seen him around, some pretty much freaking out because he’d not been in touch and they were desperate. Most of them were used to him going to ground for a while, though, and none of them wanted to attract too much attention by trying to track him down, so after a while, people stopped asking. Marcus didn’t really have any friends, not the kind who don’t want you to sell them drugs anyway, and if he had family, Alyssa never heard about it. So it was OK for a while.

Then one day my phone rang.

“You haven’t replied to any of my messages,” said Richard.

“Oh gosh, I didn’t get them,” I said. “But hey, I’m talking to you now.”

“Because I’m calling from my office number,” he replied. It seemed to me that he was sounding a little bit aggrieved.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Listen, I have to go, I’m on another call but let’s have that drink soon.”

“Fuck you and fuck your drink,” Richard said. He definitely sounded aggrieved that time. “I’m calling because I lost my job and it’s your fault.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“It’s gone,” Richard said.

“What’s gone?”

“The body, asshole,” said Richard. “The John Doe. Someone fucking took it.”

“Doe,” I said.

“What?”

“John Doe. You said Toe.”

“I said Doe. Anyway, the cops are on their way and I’m gonna tell them everything.”

He slammed the phone down. I waited a moment in case he was maybe going to call back and apologise, then called Alyssa. There was no answer. This was odd. Alyssa always picks up when it’s me. I tried her landline and got nothing.

Sometimes you get a feeling that things aren’t right. This was definitely one of those times. I went outside and got a cab to Alyssa’s apartment.

The elevator seemed to take forever. When it finally got to Alyssa's floor, I pretty much tore the doors open and ran down the hall to her apartment. I rang the bell and, when there was no answer, used the spare key she'd given me and let myself in.

The place looked like someone had machine-gunned it. Everything from chairs to pictures was strewn about the place and there was glass everywhere, mostly from the smashed coffee table. I closed the door behind me and that was when I nearly tripped over the body on the floor. It was cold and grey, like it had been on ice, and there was a tag on the toe. It was Marcus.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked the corpse.

I heard a noise from the bedroom, half like a door slamming and half like a shout.

"Alyssa!" I called, and walked across the shards of glass towards the bedroom.

I opened the door and went inside.

She was standing there, completely naked, facing the window.

"Alyssa?" I said, but she didn't seem to hear me.

I took a step forward. She didn't move. I put my hand on her shoulder. As I did so, I saw that the back of her head was completely hairless.

She turned.

Her face was gone.

I screamed.